

## PRESS RELEASE

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CCSJ wishes to add to the concerns that have been expressed in the media recently about the treatment of socially displaced persons in our country.

The basic moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members e.g. the poor, the marginalized, the homeless, the sick, the socially excluded. We are challenged to respond to the needs of *all* our brothers and sisters, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.

CCSJ accepts that leaving people to live on the streets is not what a mature and just society should do. **But ‘rounding’ them up and ‘corralling’ them in facilities without a proper plan is not the way that we should proceed either.**

This issue has been with us for decades and we still have no infrastructure to deal with it. We need a clearly thought out, humane strategy that is based on a medical model for treatment. Such a strategy should involve all stakeholders, including the wider community, in the consultation process.

CCSJ believes that the resulting policy and programme, which should be communicated to the wider community, will assist our fledgling nation in many ways. We suggest that a 1 year programme should be developed – based on sound policy – that will, for example, seek to address the needs of between 5 to 10 socially displaced persons per week.

The programme should be underpinned by a commitment to ensure that there is proper assessment of the needs of each socially displaced person, and that will facilitate his/her rehabilitation, re-integration into society, and, where possible, reconciliation with his/her family.

We have a duty to stand in solidarity with our ‘neighbour’. Pope John Paul II wrote: “Solidarity helps us to see the “other” - whether a person, people, or nation ...as our “neighbour”, a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which we are all equally invited by God.”

The persons who were ‘rounded up’ from our streets are among those who have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of our nation. They included not only persons who are poor and homeless, but also the mentally ill, those who are victims of drug and alcohol abuse, those needing medical treatment etc.

It is an affront to the national conscience to treat socially displaced persons in the manner in which they have been treated. They are also nationals of our country and they have a right under our Constitution to humane and just treatment.

While we each have a role to play in addressing the needs of our 'neighbour', the State has a positive moral responsibility to enhance human dignity, protect human rights, and ensure that the minimum conditions of human dignity are met for all. The State has a duty to create social conditions that allow people to reach their full potential and realise their human dignity.

The failure of the State cannot be redeemed by hiding the evidence of that failure by bundling up socially displaced persons as if they are rabid stray animals and hiding them away from the public view. Christmas is a time of charity and love. This, more than ever, is the time when we must not behave as we have behaved.

As Catholics we are encouraged to judge any economic system by what it does *for* and *to* people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it. The economy should serve people, not the other way around. How we organize our society -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

The obligation to "love our neighbor" has an individual dimension, but it also requires a broader social commitment to the common good. We have many ways to measure the health of our economy. The Christian vision of economic life looks beyond them all and asks. Does economic life enhance or threaten our life together as a community?

Our rich economy is not working for all our people. Harsh poverty plagues our country despite its great wealth. If our economy is to serve all people more fairly, then we must strengthen our common moral vision.

As our economy grows let us ensure that no one is left behind. Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet.

CCSJ calls on our Government to put systems in place to speed up the process of developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating a comprehensive plan of action to address the urgent needs of those who are termed 'vagrants' in T&T.

We need just and compassionate public policies that place the dignity of the human person at the centre of such policies. It is in serving them that we serve Christ.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION RING LEELA RAMDEEN ON 622 6680**